

**A HISTORY OF
THE GEORGE C. HARRIS HOUSE**

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The George C. Harris House is located near the centre of Grand Bank's historic downtown. The three story home sits on a large elevated lot that overlooks Grand Bank Harbour. It is most prominent from the F. M. Tessier Bridge which spans the estuary of Grand Bank Brook.

The history of the property begins in the 1800s, maybe as early as 1816. Over the years the property was occupied mainly by three families, Evans from 1816 to 1898, Harris from 1908 to 1954 and Russell from 1955 to 1978. Each of these families played an important role in the social, cultural and economic development of Grand Bank.

This house was one of three built by Samuel Harris as wedding gifts for three of his children. The other two homes are variations of the same style. The one built for Emily (Dunford) and located on College St was demolished in the 1970s. The other built for Garfield is located on Church St and was the long time residence of Dr. John Burke. It is now owned by Dr. Gamba and used as a residence and dental clinic.

The Evans Period.

William Evans, born c. 1769 at Broadhampston, Dorset came to Grand Bank in the early 19th century. In 1816 he was listed as a Merchant and Magistrate. His name appears on the list of subscribers to the first Wesleyan Church built in 1816. Charles Lench in his *History of Methodism in Grand Bank and Fortune* written in 1916 mentions that funds were paid into the store of William Evans. Evans was custodian of the funds. He was also the largest donor and his home was used for services until the church was constructed. After his death in 1845, his son Edward (1816-1898) took over the business and operated under the name of *Edward Evans and Sons*. Sometime before 1868 Edward built a large two story home on the lot. It may have replaced an earlier building on the same site. The home measured 23 feet x 43 feet. It had a saddle roof and its most prominent feature was the small front entrance. The size and style was that of a merchant home for the period. There were at least two other structures of similar style built during this period. One, the Wesleyan Mission house was built in 1846 on the site of present day Memorial Library, and the other was built on the site of the John B. Foote home on Church Street. Both of these homes have been demolished.

Edward Evans became the most prominent merchant in Grand Bank. By 1894 when James Haddon surveyed the community Evans was the largest land owner on Church Street and Water Street. He also controlled several waterfront properties. His store spanned what is now Lower Water Street. Besides being a vessel owner, merchant and trader, Edward Evans was a politician. At a time when the Burin District sent two members to the Newfoundland House of Assembly Evans was elected three times. He was first elected by acclamation with Sir Hugh Hoyles as his running mate in 1861 and was re-elected in 1865 and 1869. He did not run in the 1873 election.

The 1869 Election was a close contest in the Burin District. Confederation with Canada was an issue and his running mate Frederick Carter was a Confederate. There appears to have been some interference from merchants at St. Pierre who opposed Newfoundland's union with Canada, one of whom was John Frecker, Edward's brother-in-law. The results gave Carter and Evans a two-vote lead. However their opponents, anti-confederates Wood and LeMessurier contested the results, saying that five proxy votes at Frenchman's Cove should be disallowed. The results were upheld and Frederick Carter went on to become Prime Minister.

Edward Evans became a magistrate after his retirement from the political scene. He died in 1898. It appears that his vast holdings of land in the downtown area were sold to a newer generation of merchants in Grand Bank. Among these were George Abraham Buffett who purchased the Water Street store along with some of the water front property, and Samuel Harris who purchased most of the Church Street property adjoining his store then located near the corner of Hickman Street and Church Street, some of the waterfront property and the lot including the old Evans homestead. It was on this lot that in 1908, Harris built a home for his son George, now a landmark.

The Harris Period

The George C. Harris House is a large three story home, built in the Queen Anne style with classical features. The home measures 38 ft across the front by 32 ft wide with a balcony supported by classical columns, a steeply pitched truncated roof with a belvedere at the top. The interior is a center hall design with four rooms of approximately the same size off the main hallway. The rear entrance porch extends the full three stories. The home had at one time 4 and possibly 5 operating fire places, all corner design.

George C. was the eldest son of Samuel Harris, founder of the Samuel Harris firm. In 1895 George attended Mount Allison University, taking commercial courses before joining the firm. He married Charlotte (Lottie) Pratt daughter of Rev. John Pratt, a Methodist minister who died at Grand Bank in 1904. Sometime after 1910 George became manager of the firm's Marystown branch, later incorporated as Marystown Trading Co. In 1914 he became managing director of Samuel Harris Ltd. and after 1914 he began to expand the firm. He purchased property at Hermitage owned at one time by the Newman Co. and he later purchased Elliott & Co, a business on Change Islands. This over expansion coupled with the decline in fish prices after World War One and unfavourable government fishery regulations were the main factors which lead to the firm's bankruptcy in 1922. At the time it was said to be the largest bankruptcy in the Dominion. George C. was devastated; he shouldered the blame and left with nothing. For a time it appeared that the creditors would take his home, and probably would have had it not been for his brother in law P. L. Carr, then a manager with the Bank of Nova Scotia. Carr persuaded the creditors to hold off, took over the defunct business, restructured it and became extremely successful. Carr died at the peak of his career in 1943.

In an effort to try and change the fishery regulations, George C. contested the two seat Burin District, winning the May 1923 election. His party did not fare so well, the party leader J. R. Bennett lost to incumbent Squires. These were trying times in Newfoundland. There were problems with the railway and with ex-servicemen re-entering the labour force. As a result of this and problems within the Squires administration another election was called the following year. This time although the election was close, G. C. and his running mate Marmaduke Winter lost to the conservatives Lake and Long. In the election of June 1924 conservative Walter Monroe became Prime Minister. Ironically Walter Monroe and his company were among the creditors of the bankrupt Harris firm and later took equity in the restructured company.

George C. was a director of the Western Marine Insurance Co, a company owned by local merchants involved in shipping and the fishery. He was secretary to the Hospital Board for many years, operating an office out of his home. An avid reader, he had a large collection of books. On March 1, 1930, a major fire destroyed a large section of Grand Bank's waterfront, including several shops and warehouses directly across the street from the Harris home. The house was spared but it did suffer considerable damage to the facade. The elaborate balcony and entrance were removed about this time, probably due to fire damages. The balcony was replaced with a conventional gable roof porch and the french door with sidelights was replaced with a small window.

George's wife Lottie, a sister of world-renowned Newfoundland poet Edwin J. Pratt, was a community leader, a well trained soprano and a painter. She painted numerous water colours and gave them to friends as gifts. Many are still in homes around Grand Bank. There is a small collection on display in the home.

George C and Lottie lived in the house until their deaths in 1954. They died without issue.

The Russell Period

In 1955 Hazen Russell, of St. John's purchased the property from Lottie's nephew and her executor, Calvert Pratt. The Russell family, including Roy and Paul, were involved in shipping and frozen fish processing. In that year they built a frozen fish processing plant at Grand Bank. The home was used as a staff house. Over time the home was converted to two apartments, and a small extension was made to the rear, including a double rear entrance entered at grade level. Windows were changed, one front bedroom window and the attic dormer window were removed and replaced with a sliding glass type. During the time the home was converted to a two family home, the original staircase, the most interesting architectural feature of the interior was removed. This staircase, which connected the main hallway to the second floor, turned through 180 degrees and used two 90 degree winders. During conversion to two apartments, the winders were removed and the stairs rerouted through the old pantry and into the grade entrance porch. A bathroom was then constructed using the space left by the old staircase and part of the pantry.

The Russell family, Ruth and James Mahon and Roy and June Russell, occupied the home for most of the period between 1955 and 1979.

The Russell family's involvement in the fishery was quite different from any of the other local merchants. They had a fleet of trawlers and operated a processing plant year round, creating a level of employment unknown in Grand Bank's history and a period of prosperity matched only by that of the early 1900s. The property changed hands in 1979 and again in 1982, each time as part of the local fish plant. In 1992 when Fishery Products International closed its Grand Bank operations the property was transferred to the Town of Grand Bank. The Grand Bank Heritage Society acquired the property in 1993.

The Restoration:

In the summer of 1993 the Grand Bank Heritage Society embarked on a major restoration of the property. Funding was supplied by the Cooperation Agreement, the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland & Labrador, Provincial and Municipal Governments and other sources.

The restoration was based largely on three photos, two supplied by Daphne Howse, niece of Lottie Harris showing the classical columns and the south elevation. The other photo by Samuel Garland of St. John's, the front and north side elevation.

Most of the windows are original, but two on the front and one on the south wall are new as are the windows around the french door. The balcony, classical columns, the belevedre some siding and all the roof shingles were replaced in 1993. In September the house was plaqued by the Heritage Foundation. This restoration was one of the reasons the Grand Bank Heritage Society received the Manning Award in 1995.

Interior Restoration.

During the exterior restoration very little interior work was done, the kitchen being the exception. The kitchen cabinets from the 1960s were removed, the walls restored and covered with period wall covering. The acoustic ceiling tile were removed and the beaded pine ceiling restored. The kitchen is now used as a craft store operated by the Heritage Society.

The interior is mostly intact with the exception of the staircase. The only other major change is that modern slab doors now replace the original panel doors.

On February 6, 1995 work began on the restoration of the staircase to its original form. With no photos this restoration was plain detective work. Angle lines on the floor, old paint lines, colour changes on the rockplaster lath and the memories of people who worked for the Harrises in the 1940s and 1950s provided the few details used to reconstruct the staircase.

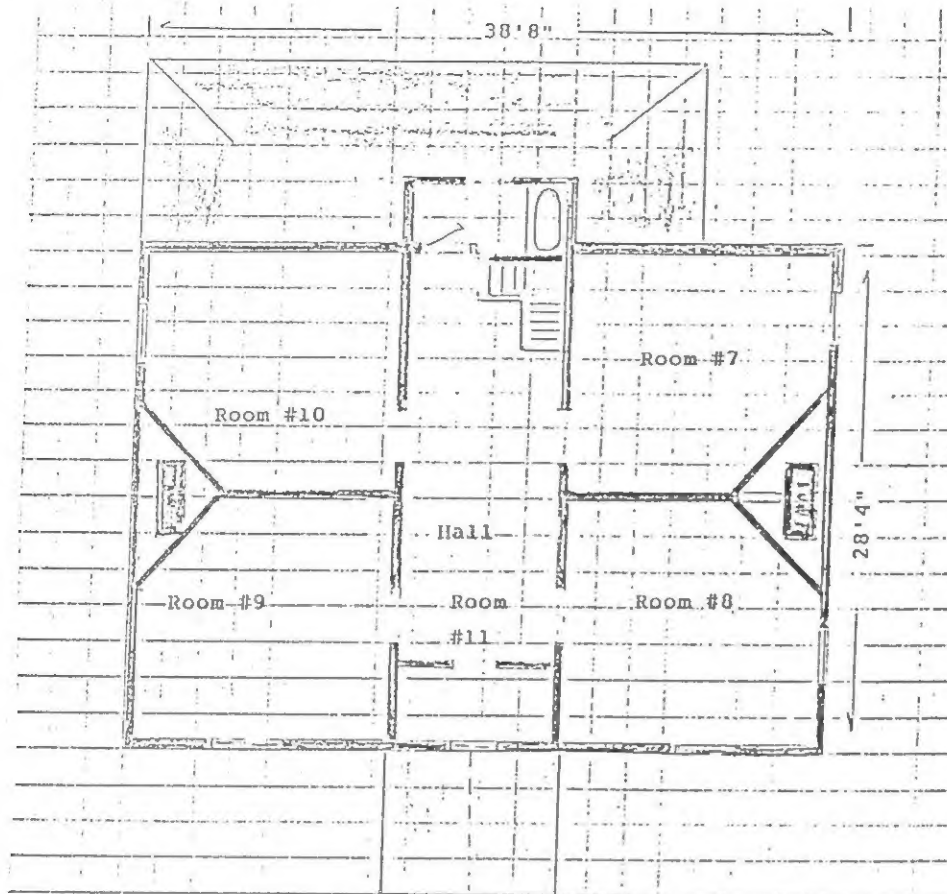
The Staircase is somewhat unusual in that it uses two winders and two treads and no landing as it turns 180 degrees. The load in eight treads is transferred to posts. The wood in the original staircase was pine stringers and Douglas Fir threads, the replacements parts are all clear pine with exception of the nosing which is of Douglas fir. The stair case was completed on March 31, 1995



From the 1894 Haddon Map of Grand Bank, showing part of the downtown & waterfront

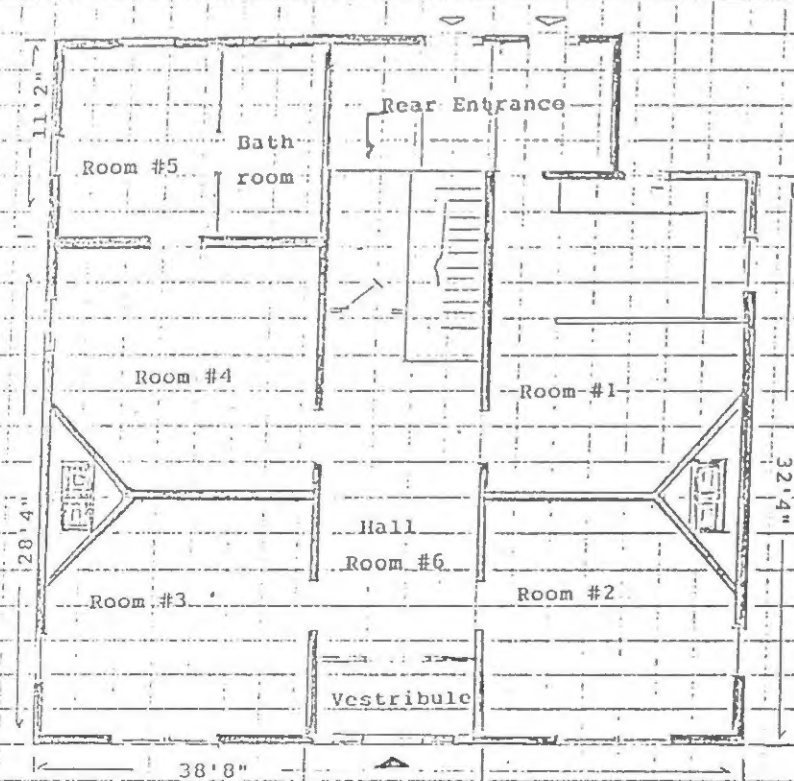


The Edward Evans House c. 1868

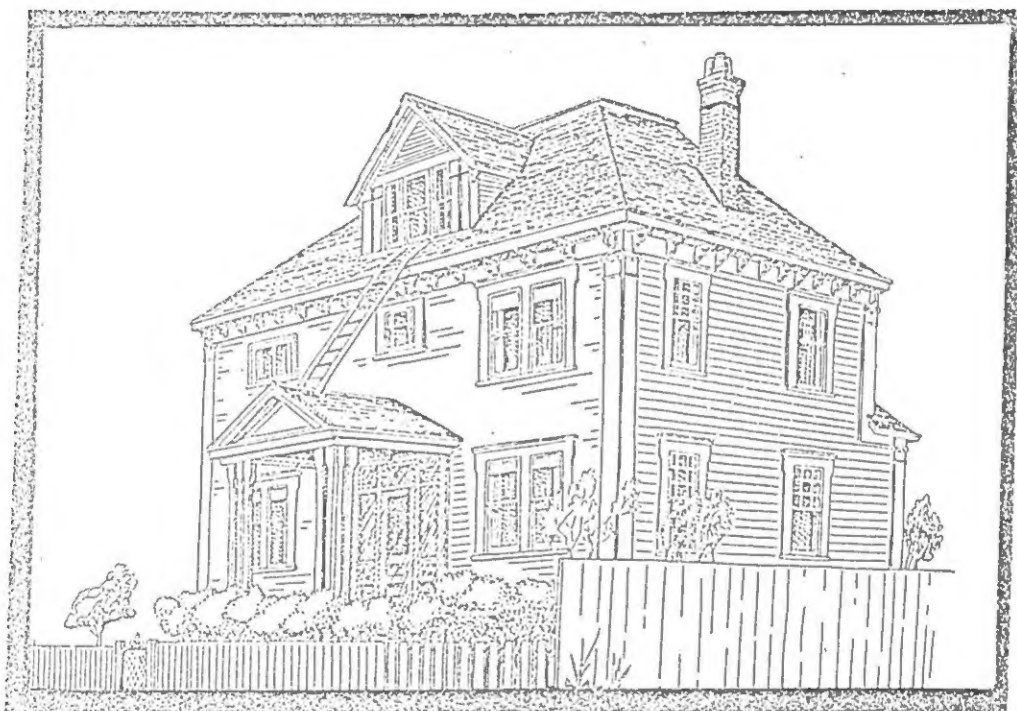


The Floor Plan in 1993 showing the 1960s entrance and altered stairs

Front Second Floor



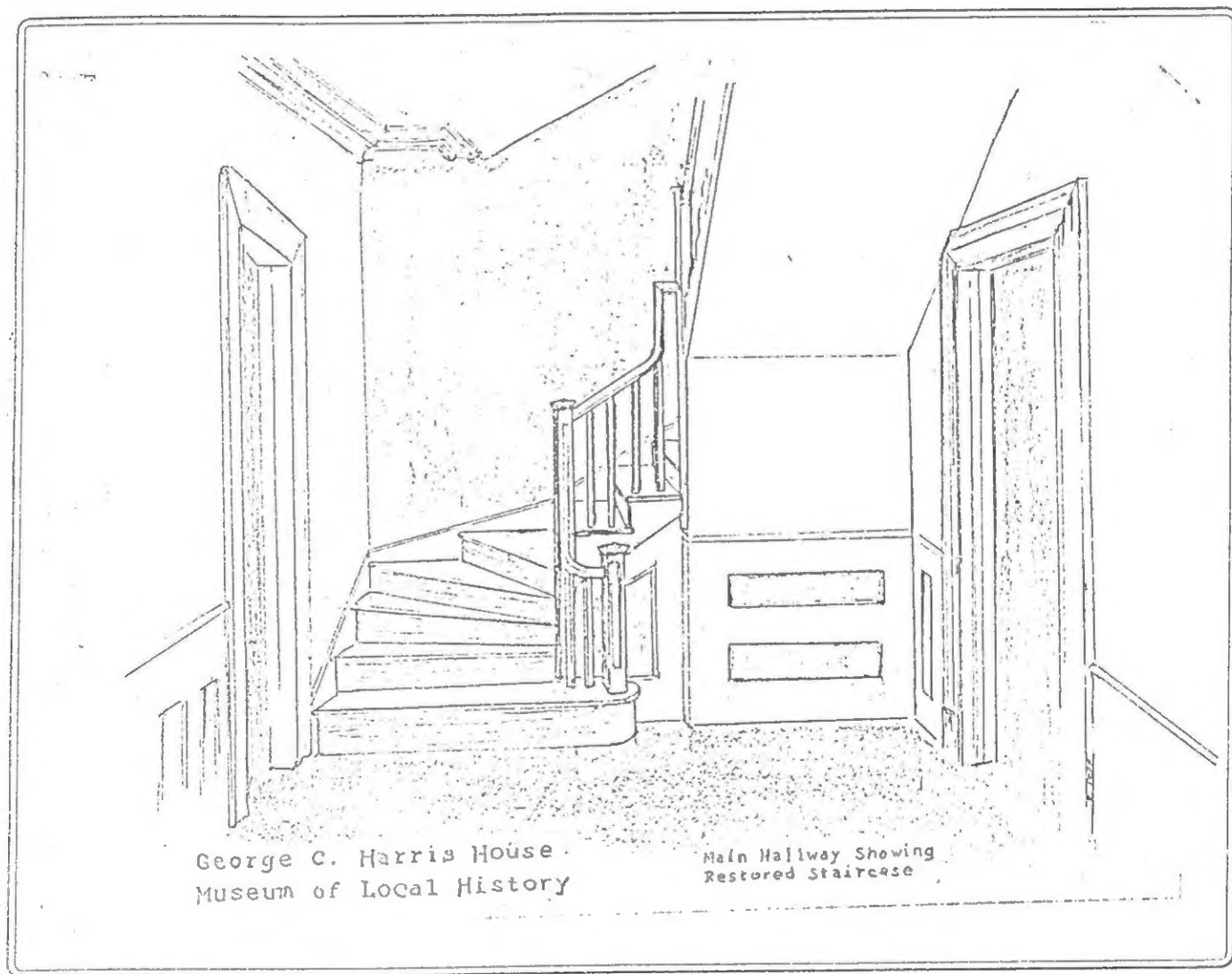
The Russell Period



A line drawing by Jean Ball, from the mid 1970s as published
by Newfoundland Historic Trust in their publication
"Ten Historic Towns"

Reconstructed staircase drawings 1995

Randell Pope



References and Notes

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4. Old photos of the John B. Foote house and the Wesleyan Mission House from Ms Cora Foote, R. J. Pope Collection, A style of early Merchant Home.
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1. Personal interview with Roy & June Russell spring 1987. and Sept 1994.

Restoration

1. Information on Samuel E. Garland Vol 2, Page 482 *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland & Labrador*
2. Restoration of Widows Walk and Balcony drawings by Doug Richardson.
3. Floor plan and staircase plans and drawings by Randell Pope.